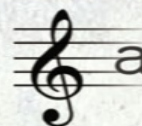
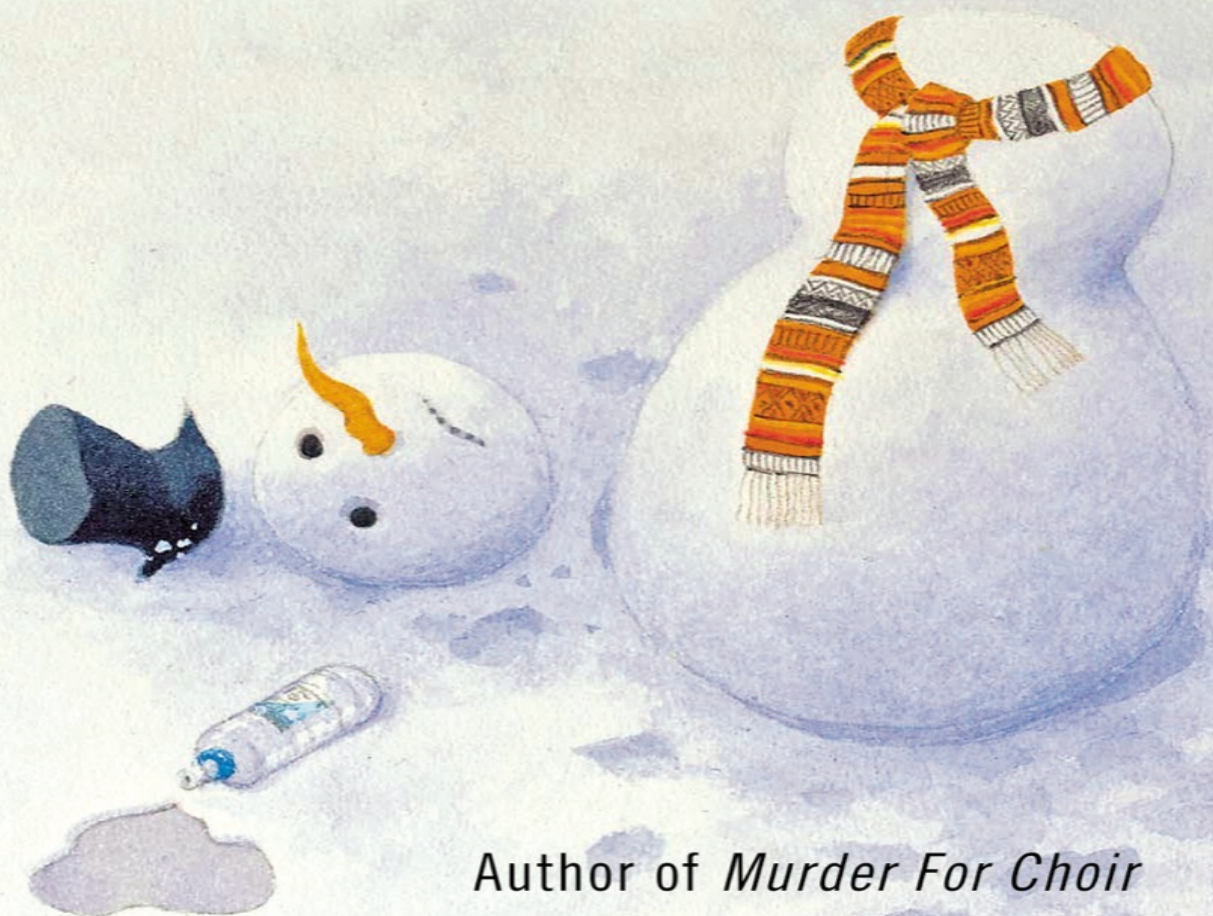




End Me a Tenor

 a glee club mystery



Author of *Murder For Choir*

JOELLE CHARBONNEAU

Praise for

Murder for Choir

“Joelle Charbonneau brings a professional’s eye and experience to *Murder for Choir*, and readers will enjoy her heroine Paige Marshall’s take on high school show choirs. Music and drama lovers who can’t get enough of Rachel, Finn, Kurt, and the gang will have enormous fun with this delightfully witty take on ‘Murder, She Sang.’ Encore, encore!”

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“An intriguing mystery . . . I’m looking forward to future entries in this series.”

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“Imagine if Stephanie Plum joined the cast of *Glee*, then someone proved to be more felonious than harmonious.”

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MURDER FOR CHOIR
END ME A TENOR

End Me a Tenor



JOELLE CHARBONNEAU



BERKLEY PRIME CRIME, NEW YORK

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For my son, Max.

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Chapter 1



Whoever invented artificial snow deserved to be shot. No matter how careful I was, iridescent flakes landed in my hair, my clothes, and my mouth. Not only did they taste bad, but the sparkly flakes made me sneeze. The label claimed they were hypoallergenic. The label lied.

Then again, none of my show choir students strategically scattering handfuls of the stuff across the stage seemed to be having a problem. They were delighted to spend their Saturday afternoon flirting, rehearsing, and decorating the auditorium for the Winter Wonderland concert. Show choir was their life. I was sorry to say that, at this very moment, it was my life, too. But not for long. I'd gotten an opera gig, and my performance next weekend was going to be my big break. My real career would take off, and I'd be done with teenage angst.

"The stage looks great, don't you think?" Prospect Glen's choir director, Larry DeWeese, walked over to me. His smile was bright, but the way he was wringing his hands spoke volumes. Clearly, the Yoga he'd been doing in his spare time hasn't helped calm his nerves.

"What's wrong?"

"Wrong, Paige?" Larry raked a hand through his disheveled brown hair as his smile widened. Not a good sign. "Why would you think anything is wrong?"

I'd only been working with Larry and the Prospect Glen show choirs for four months, but every time Larry smiled like that bad things happened. I just hoped that whatever the crisis was it wouldn't involve a dead body—like it had my first week on the job.

"Miss Marshall?"

I turned toward the sound of my name, sneezed, and then smiled at the student who patiently waited for my attention. Megan Posey was shy, but she had a fabulous soprano voice and a great work ethic, which made up for her lack of dance training. Some of the other students snickered at Megan's struggles to pick up the choreography, but she ignored them and always came to the next rehearsal prepared. I had to admire that. "What's up, Megan?"

The blonde senior frowned. “One of the snowmen lost his head. Do you want us to duct-tape it back on?”

The mere mention of the word “snow” was enough to make me sneeze and sneeze and sneeze. Both Megan and Larry took a step back as I sneezed one last time.

“Why don’t I handle the snowman problem?” Larry fished a crumpled tissue out of his pocket and handed it to me. “That way, Miss Marshall can start rehearsal. We only have the theater for another two hours.”

Larry headed stage left to work his magic on Frosty, leaving me in charge. Drat. While the students pushed the boundaries of good behavior around him, they always stepped back before crossing the line into detention. His having the power to fail them garnered a semblance of the teenagers’ respect. As a voice teacher and extracurricular activity coach, I didn’t have the power to alter their grade point average, which meant I was forced to gain their respect the old-fashioned way—through fear. While I didn’t see the allure of show choir, I was grateful these kids lived in terror of losing their places on the squad.

Sneezing one last time, I yelled, “Time for warm-ups. Music in Motion will rehearse first. Then Mr. DeWeese will run the Sing-sations through their numbers.”

A few of the boys helped me move the grand piano into place, and I tried not to cringe as my fingers touched the keys. While the keyboard had been disinfected (I knew because I had done it myself) it was hard to forget Greg Lucas’s dead body that was once perched on top of it. Assuring myself that the piano didn’t have death cooties, I began to play the first vocal warm-up.

Five minutes later, I was happy to leave the death piano and walked over to the CD player at the end of the stage.

“We’re going to run the entire program from beginning to end. Once we’ve gone through all the songs, we can go back and polish. Take your places.”

When everyone was in his or her starting position, I pressed play and watched my choir swing into action.

For the first three songs, the teens twirled, shimmied, and sashayed around the stage singing about reindeer, sleigh rides, and other winter topics. No mention of Christmas, Hanukkah, or other religious holidays was allowed, which in my mind eliminated some of the best music selections. But the students didn’t seem to care what the music was about as long as it was upbeat and had plenty of solo opportunities. I winced as the current soloist reached for a note and missed. Sighing, I made a note to work on that along with missed dance steps, an out-of-tune harmony, and a lift that didn’t quite get off the ground. None of the students looked concerned by their mistakes. They laughed and smiled and had a blast.

Then the music changed and so did their attitude. This music wasn’t just for their friends and family attending the winter concert. Though these songs would also be performed at the concert, they were part of the show choir’s repertoire for the competitions that would start in two months—competitions my students intended to win. But not if they danced and sang the way they just had.

When they struck their final poses, I hit the off switch and got to work. “Megan, you need to spot your turn so you don’t fall out of it. Markus, keep your head up. No looking at the floor. Ethan, I need more diction. If you’re singing English, I should be able to understand you. Chessie, don’t push during your solo. The pitch is going flat.”

“What do you mean, I’m going flat?” Chessie flipped her long dark hair behind her shoulders and gave me a look that could kill. Which I suppose I should have expected. While senior Chessie Bock was undeniably the most talented member of my choir, she was also the most difficult.

When I first started as coach, Chessie had done her best to get me ousted from the job. Not too long after school started, we came to a truce that I hoped was based on my talent and leadership. Most likely it had more to do with my willingness to keep some of Chessie's less-than-legal antics under wraps. Chessie was applying to several of the top music theater schools in the country. While most colleges looked for extracurricular activities, making license plates in the clink probably wasn't going to gain her a scholarship. Over the past couple weeks, I'd noticed her attitude reasserting itself. Clearly, the cease-fire gained by my silence had come to an end.

Hoping to avoid a meltdown, I chose my words carefully. "The solo is in the perfect range for you to show off your voice, but today you're pushing the volume. When you push, you have a tendency to go flat."

Chessie's eyes flashed. "I never go flat."

A few of the students behind Chessie rolled their eyes. Taking a deep breath, I explained, "Everyone goes flat. The best singers recognize the areas they need to improve and make adjustments."

The set of Chessie's jaw told me she still wanted to fight. Instead, she gave a sharp nod of her head and said, "Can I try the solo again?"

While Chessie hated being critiqued, she far more disliked being thought of as less than the best. Taking a seat at the death piano, I ran Chessie through her solo. While she still looked pissed, she sounded fabulous. Chalk one up for me.

Once the rest of the problems were addressed, I started the CD player and watched the choir go through its routines again. Aside from a couple slips on the snow, the team looked like it might be ready for the concert on Thursday night. Thank God!

When the last number was complete, I gave a couple more notes, reminded the kids about tomorrow's rehearsal with the Music in Motion band, and asked them to drive safely home. The thought of fourteen teenagers cruising down the icy streets made me happy I had offered to stay late and help Larry polish the second-tier show choir's routines today.

And after seeing their routines, I knew why Larry needed help. Made up mostly of underclassmen who aspired to compete in the top show choir, the thirty-four-member Singations did their best to perform Larry's unique brand of choreography. With so many kids and only so much room to move, the dancing quickly dissolved into a human game of pinball.

Yikes.

An hour later, the dance steps had been simplified, one song had been axed from the program, and the kids looked ready to drop. But the routines were better. I hoped by the concert that they'd look better still.

While the students pulled on their coats and boots and gathered up boxes from their show choir Secret Santas, Larry yelled, "Good work, everyone. Don't forget to remind your parents that you have rehearsal every night before the concert. Miss Marshall and I expect to see each and every one of you there."

"Music in Motion is meeting after school this week," I reminded Larry. "I won't be at the evening rehearsals. Remember?"

I'd shifted the practice schedule when I was cast as the soprano in the sing-along *Messiah* starring world-renowned tenor David Richard. While David Richard wasn't expected to attend the weeklong rehearsal schedule preceding the sold-out performances, the rest of the soloists were.

"I know that was the plan, but that was before."

"Before what?"

Larry's attention shifted from me to the students walking out the door. "I need to make sure everyone has a ride home. I'll explain everything when I come back."

Before I could protest, Larry hurried to the back of the auditorium toward the lobby, leaving me to wonder what had changed since yesterday when Larry and I last spoke about my rehearsal plans. While I wasn't interested in being a high school show choir coach for the long term, I needed the job to pay the bills until my performing career took off. This week's gig had the potential to help me take that step, but nothing in the performing world was guaranteed. Talent didn't necessarily translate into fame and fortune. Luck was a huge part of it. Until Larry's cryptic announcement, I'd hoped my luck had taken a turn for the better.

"How did rehearsal go?"

I turned toward the voice coming from the stage wings and smiled as Prospect Glen's theater teacher, Devlyn O'Shea, stepped out of the shadows. The sexy glint in his blue eyes made me think that maybe my luck wasn't all that terrible after all. Standing over six feet tall with brown hair, a slightly crooked nose, and a muscular dancer's body, Devlyn was enough to make any girl feel lucky. Until they noticed the pink sweater that coordinated perfectly with his pink and gray pinstriped pants.

That's when most girls would curse the fates that such a fantastic male specimen was gay. I should know. I'd cursed those same fates when we first met. Of course, that was before I learned his secret: At Devlyn's first job he'd seen a teacher's life destroyed after the teacher rejected a student's advances. In a fit of pique, the girl marched to the principal's office to file a report of sexual misconduct. By the time the teacher was exonerated, his career was in shreds. When Devlyn started this job, he took to wearing pastels to protect himself and his job from high school girls' unwanted advances.

"They have a ways to go before the competitions in the spring, but they'll hold their own at the concert." Ignoring the way my heart jumped as Devlyn sauntered across the stage toward me, I asked "What are you doing here? I thought you had a family thing today."

"Larry called and asked if I could swing by for a few minutes. I was happy to say yes since my mother was trying to talk me into a blind date with the daughter of one of her friends."

I stamped down a flicker of jealousy and asked, "What did you tell her?"

He gave me a sexy grin. "I said for the past couple of months I've had my eye on a beautiful brunette. That our schedules hadn't allowed us to pursue a relationship, but I was hopeful we'd find the time soon. What do you think?" he asked, taking a step forward. "Do you think we can find the time?"

I could feel the heat radiating off his body, and my heart skipped a beat. "Sure. I think we can make time for that."

Devlyn's eyes scanned the auditorium and then settled back on me. His head dipped and his lips brushed against mine. The kiss was light, and over before it began. But my lips were tingling and my legs weak when Devlyn said, "What do you say we catch a late dinner after—"

"Thank God you're here, Devlyn." Larry's panicked voice echoed from the back of the large auditorium. "We have a huge problem."

As Larry hurried down the center aisle to the stage, Devlyn shot me an amused smile that I couldn't help returning. Larry often referred to a hole in his sock as a huge problem.

"Did Chessie complain about my critique of her singing?" It wouldn't be the first time she'd gone running to Larry. The last was when she'd been assigned only one solo for this winter concert.

Larry shook his head as he climbed the escape stairs onto the stage. "I want you both to brace yourselves. This is the worst news possible."

The terror shining in Larry's eyes had my stomach clenching. Was someone injured? Dead?

~~"Buffalo Grove's and Madison's show choirs are going to be competing with one of our same songs. We're in serious trouble."~~

"Are you kidding?" I laughed with relief, but then stopped. Devlyn and Larry weren't laughing. "I guess I don't understand. Why does it matter if we perform one of the same songs?"

Larry let out a dramatic sigh. "The judges look for creativity as well as execution. They won't invite us to compete at nationals if they think we're taking our ideas from other teams. The choir booster president has already contacted the school board to express her concern. If we don't come up with a new song by Thursday's concert . . ." Larry swallowed hard and looked at Devlyn, who in turn looked at me.

"What?" I asked. "What's going to happen if we don't have a new song ready?"

Larry's lip trembled as his eyes met mine. "You'll be fired."



Being a show choir coach might not have been my life's ambition, but the idea of being fired freaked me out. Which is why I was driving through the sleet and snow to Prospect Glen High School at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning. Last night, over pepperoni pizza and warm soda, Larry, Devlyn, and I had kicked around ideas for replacement songs. I'd stayed up until midnight tweaking what I hoped was a brilliant arrangement of the chosen number. This morning, Devlyn and I would create the choreography. How the team was going to learn the music and steps before Thursday's concert was beyond me. Personally, I didn't understand why we couldn't just tell the choir boosters that we were working on a new song. Unfortunately, Larry nixed that option. The new song had to be ready and performed by Thursday. Or else.

If I didn't want to lose my source of guaranteed income, I needed to find a way to squeeze in extra practice time with the show choir in between *Messiah* rehearsals. While my aunt would be happy to let me sponge more than free rent, I was raised to pay my own way. I couldn't lose my coaching job. At least, not yet.

Wrapping my scarf around my mouth and nose, I grabbed my dance bag and climbed out of my toasty warm car into the arctic cold. My car told me the temperature outside was ten degrees, which seemed optimistic. By the time I reached the school's side door, I had barely enough sensation in my fingers to slide the key into the lock, open the door, and close out the cold behind me.

Achoo. Achoo. Achoo.

Crap. Some of the artificial snow must have gotten on my coat. It was the only explanation for the sneezing, because I was not getting sick.

Warmth was beginning to return to my appendages as I unlocked the choir room door, dumped my dance bag on a chair, and pushed the piano to the side of the room to give Devlyn and me room to dance. I had taken off my electric blue coat and gotten down on the floor to stretch when Devlyn walked in carrying two large cups of coffee.

"I thought the caffeine might inspire us." He set the cups on the piano bench and shrugged out of his black trench coat and violet scarf. Underneath he was wearing black sweats and a fitted gray T-shirt. Between the coffee and Devlyn's biceps, I was starting to think this morning rehearsal wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Devlyn handed me a cup of coffee, walked over to the CD player, and pushed play. "I know you have to be at *Messiah* rehearsal in a couple of hours, so let's get to work."

Any ideas of a fun, flirtatious morning were quickly put to rest. The minute the music started,

Devlyn danced like a man possessed. We twirled, dipped, and stomped, arguing about the best dance moves.

“The dance needs more difficulty or it won’t score well.”

“Well, it won’t score well if the team is too winded to sing,” I shot back.

“Your job is to make sure they can.” Devlyn grabbed a towel out of his dance bag. “The only way the school board and the boosters will let you keep that job is if we get this number ready.”

My stomach clenched in panic. Somewhere between last night and this morning, I’d half convince myself that Larry was just being overdramatic. That my job didn’t hinge on a new show choir number being ready by Thursday. By the way Devlyn was acting, it was clear he believed it did. That meant I was totally screwed.

“How can the school board fire me for doing the same song two other choirs are doing now? The competition isn’t even until spring. That’s not fair.”

“This isn’t about fair.” Devlyn’s eyes flashed. “This is about winning. Especially since Chessie Bock’s father is on the board. If he thinks a new coach will get his daughter a better shot at landing a trophy, he’ll make sure a new coach is hired.”

Oh, crap. If Chessie’s father was in charge of my fate, I might as well hang it up now.

My dejection must have shown because Devlyn put his arm around me. “Don’t give up. We’re going to show them that you’re the best thing to ever happen to this program. Right?”

Taking a deep breath, I considered my options. Give up or fight?

Since giving up wasn’t my style, I walked over to the CD player, hit play, and nodded. “Right. Let’s get to work.”

Every muscle in my body wept as I walked into Northwestern University’s Cahn Auditorium. I’d changed into black pants and a deep green sweater, which I hoped looked casually professional. Making a good impression on both my fellow soloists and the show’s conductor was important. My heart pounded with a combination of excitement and nerves as I walked through the lobby and into the historic thousand-seat theater. Four chairs were positioned on the front of the stage. Risers lined with chairs sat farther back. A blonde was flipping through music in one of the chairs up front.

As I walked down the side aisle of the theater, the blonde looked up and smiled. “You must be Paige. I’m Vanessa Moulton.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, climbing the escape stairs onto the stage. Technically we’d met before, not that Vanessa would remember. She had performed the role of Ida in *Die Fledermaus* at the Lyric Opera while I sang in the ensemble. She had a stunning voice and a demanding personality, which according to gossip, was the reason she had yet to land any major roles.

Carrying my bag filled with singer essentials—a black binder with the music score, a large water bottle, and several well-sharpened pencils—I walked across the stage to my chair. “Where is everyone?” According to my watch, rehearsal began in five minutes.

Vanessa snorted. “You don’t really expect a rehearsal conducted by Magdalena Tebar to start on time, do you? She’s known for making an entrance. I think Jonathan McMann is lurking downstairs in the greenroom, and our accompanist is having a smoke. If you need to freshen up, you have plenty of time.”

Vanessa went back to studying her music, and I headed backstage to the stairs that led to the greenroom. I’d performed in this theater before. When school wasn’t in session, like now, the university rented the facility to other performance groups. In past years, I’d done a number of

professional shows here. I was hoping this performance would be the one that made critics sit up and pay attention. With talent like David Richard on the bill, how could I lose?

Wrapped up in my own thoughts, I barely registered the sound of raised voices. Until I turned the corner and saw a petite, busty brunette punch world-renowned tenor David Richard dead in the face.



Chapter 2



“How was rehearsal, dear?” My aunt Millie smiled at me from her perch on the stool at the kitchen island. On the other side of the counter, her houseguest, Aldo Mangialardi, was dropping biscuit dough onto a cookie sheet.

Aldo was a gifted pianist and a friend of Millie’s. A few months ago, he’d tried to take my car for a spin only to end up in the hospital. When the doctor refused to discharge Aldo because he lived alone, Millie offered him her guest room for a few days. Only Aldo hadn’t left. Instead, he cooked gourmet meals and feigned deafness when Millie suggested he move out.

Sitting at Aldo’s feet, looking for handouts, was Millie’s prizewinning standard poodle, Killer. The minute Killer spotted me, he started to growl. Most days I was intimidated by Killer’s anger management problem and gave the dog a wide berth. Today, my need for the wine sitting on the counter trumped all.

Dumping my bag on the floor, I ignored the dog’s low growl and poured myself a large glass of red wine which just about matched my aunt’s current hair color. “The other soloists are very talented. It should be a great show.”

“With you singing, how could it not be *brillante*?” Aldo smoothed the tufts of white hair springing from the sides of his head and gave me a wink. “Millie has been telling everyone that you are singing with the famous David Richard.”

“Did you see him today?” Millie’s eyes twinkled behind her pink-rimmed glasses. “Is he as handsome in person as he is in his photos?”

“I didn’t have the chance to meet him today.” Between David clutching his nose and the brunette screaming angry threats, I’d decided it was best to make an exit before anyone noticed I was there. Which was probably a good thing since the brunette strutted into rehearsal ten minutes later with her orchestral score tucked under one arm and her conductor baton in the other. Something told me that international conductor Magdalena Tebar wouldn’t be happy if she knew I’d witnessed her right hook

The last thing a singer wants to do is piss off the conductor. David Richard must not have gotten that memo. ~~“The conductor said David would be at rehearsal tomorrow. Speaking of rehearsals, I need to go work on some new choreography Devlyn and I are putting together. I have to teach it to the choir tomorrow.”~~

Millie’s eyes narrowed. “Why do you need new choreography?”

The idea of sharing my plight was tempting. But I knew my aunt. She hadn’t earned her pink Mary Kay Cadillac convertible by waiting for a problem to resolve itself. She’d end up on the school board president’s doorstep, doing an impersonation of the Christmas caroler from hell.

Plastering a smile on my face, I said, “Another school is doing one of our songs and we want the option of changing routines if we need it. No big deal.” Grabbing my bag, I headed up to my room and hoped I was right.



“Five, six, seven, eight. Step kick step prep turn turn turn. Eric, you’re turning the wrong way. Let’s try it again. Five, six, seven, eight.”

I started the music again and watched the team as they stumbled through the dance steps. To their credit, the kids didn’t whine and moan about learning a new routine. The minute Larry and I explained the problem, the team was ready and willing to work.

“Ms. Marshall.” Chessie planted her hands on her hips. “You haven’t assigned the solos yet. I don’t see why the soloists should have to learn some of the steps when they won’t be performing them.”

Well, most of the team.

“For now, everyone learns everything.” When Chessie opened her mouth to complain, I added, “Solo or not, I would think you’d have the biggest motivation for learning the routine. Aspiring musical theater majors are expected to learn and perform dance routines in under an hour at their college auditions.”

Chessie’s eyes narrowed, but she stepped back in line. I counted off the routine again, trying not to let my embarrassment show. Yes, I was purposely avoiding casting the solos so I didn’t have to deal with the fallout that would occur when Chessie didn’t receive one. The girl didn’t have the right sound for the song. It was as simple as that.

Sneezing, I glanced at the clock and hit stop on the CD player. While the choir could use more work, I had to get going or I’d be late for my next rehearsal. “That’s it for today. I expect everyone to come in tomorrow morning with the dance steps learned. Mr. O’Shea will be here for both rehearsals tomorrow to help demonstrate the two lifts we will be adding into the choreography. Get some rest, and I’ll see you first thing in the morning.”

I popped a zinc cough drop into my mouth and watched as the kids slowly gathered up their stuff, shrugged on their coats, and strolled toward the door. I tried not to look anxious about heading to the exit myself. If I left in the next couple minutes, I’d still have time to hit the drive-thru and get dinner before my six o’clock rehearsal.

“Ms. Marshall.”

Crap.

“Yes, Chessie?”

“Can you give me any advice on what I should work on for my solo audition? My parents are hoping that I’ll get another solo, and I’d like to do everything I can to make that happen.” She gave me a sweet smile, but I could see the implied threat in the glimmer of her eyes. Chessie knew my job was at stake, and she was trying to leverage that into a second solo. I wanted to scream.

Instead, I gave a wide smile and said, “Make sure you keep your sound open and don’t push when you get to the high notes. We’ll have solo auditions on Wednesday morning. That gives you plenty of time to practice.”

I glanced at the clock and grabbed my bag, hoping to make my escape, but Chessie had several more questions. By the time I shook her loose and got to my car, snow was falling. Even without stopping for dinner, I’d need a miracle to make it to rehearsal on time.

I practiced my arias as traffic crawled while trying hard not to think about Chessie’s not-so-veiled threats. If I didn’t give her the solo, I could kiss my job good-bye. If I caved, I’d be compromising my musical integrity and the chances of the group winning the national competition in the spring. Well, at least my day couldn’t possibly get worse.

It took ten minutes to find street parking at the theater. The snow was falling harder as I slipped and slid down the sidewalk to the stage door.

The loud chatter of voices hit me the minute I stepped into the building. Today was a full run-through, which meant both the orchestra and the chorus were in attendance. The place was a madhouse. This version of the sing-along *Messiah* was getting media attention not only because of David Richard’s stunning tenor voice but also because the chorus was comprised of both professional and college singers. Richard was currently a visiting faculty member at Northwestern University and had hand-selected the students who were participating in this concert. From the articles I’d read, the selected students not only got to sing in the concert, but also received private coaching sessions with David. At their age, I would have killed to have both on my résumé.

I signed my initials next to my name on the cast list on the call-board and followed the posted instructions for soloists to wait in their dressing rooms until the orchestra and chorus had been seated and warmed up. Several string players, instruments in hand, were filing into the orchestra pit as I walked through the greenroom to the soloist dressing rooms on the other side. A gorgeous and somewhat familiar-looking redhead carrying a violin case almost smacked right into me, but I ignored both the woman and the dirty look she shot me as I stared at my name listed next to one of the dressing room doors. It didn’t matter how many shows I’d been in, seeing my name on a dressing room gave me chills. The fact that Vanessa Moulton was sitting in the dressing room, pushing buttons on her cell phone, didn’t alter my excitement in the least.

“You’re late.” She glanced up at me. “Half the chorus and orchestra are late. So much for this being a professional production. I’ve already talked to my manager about filing a complaint.”

Before I could say anything, a deep voice from behind said, “Give it a rest, Vanessa. Your manager can’t control the weather.” Our bass soloist, Jonathan McMann, smiled at me in the mirror. “Don’t mind Vanessa. She’s just testy because our star didn’t remember her.”

“He was simply distracted, that’s all.”

“Probably by his reflection in the mirror.” Jonathan laughed. “Hell, if I looked half as good as he does, I’d probably be enamored with myself, too.”

Vanessa gave Jonathan a weak smile. “You’ve always looked good to me.”

Me, too. While gray threaded through Jonathan’s close-cropped brown hair, the signs of age only served to set off the flecks of silver in his green eyes. With that and his six-foot-three height, Jonathan was still capturing romantic lead roles both in the smaller opera companies here in the city and no doubt in the dreams of many of the Northwestern female population he gave voice lessons to.

Hanging up my coat, I tried not to feel left out as Vanessa and Jonathan chatted like old friends. Since my water was only half full, I grabbed the bottle and my music and left the dressing room. I headed toward the water fountain at the other end of the greenroom—and ran smack into a snow-

covered David Richard. Music and water bottles hit the deck. I would have, too, if not for a pair of strong arms catching me before gravity took effect.

My heart cringed. While I wanted to make an impression, this was so not it. I started to apologize, but was cut off as David hoisted me to my feet and yelled, “What the hell do you think you’re doing down here? All chorus members are supposed to be on stage. You don’t belong in this business if you can’t follow the simplest of instructions.”

I couldn’t decide whether I was embarrassed or angry that he assumed I was a member of the ensemble. Straightening my shoulders, I said, “I’m not a member of the chorus.”

The chiseled face that my aunt admired sneered. “Well, if you’re a fan looking for an autograph, you’re going to be disappointed. I’m here to perform, not be fawned over.”

Decision made. I was pissed. World-class singer or not, the man needed an attitude adjustment. “It’s a good thing fawning isn’t on my to-do list.” I held out my hand. “Paige Marshall—soprano soloist. I would say it is nice to meet you, but neither of us would believe it.”

I watched understanding bloom in David Richard’s deep blue eyes. He ran a hand through his wavy dark hair, flashed the same crooked smile that appeared on every one of his CDs, and took my hand in one of his perfectly tanned ones. “I apologize for my behavior. You are so much more attractive than your photograph. I didn’t recognize you.”

Sure. Photography, not ego, was the problem here.

While I didn’t buy his apology for a minute, I knew when to back off. “I appreciate the compliment.” I stooped down and picked up my binder and bottle of water, only to have the bottle snatched out of my hand.

“That one is mine.” David reached down and snagged a second bottle that had rolled under a folding chair. “This is yours.”

The brand, bottle size, and quantity of liquid inside were, to me, identical. I wasn’t sure how he could tell the difference. Before I had a chance to ask, our stage manager’s voice rang out from the monitors. Soloists needed to report to the stage in five minutes.

David gave me another cover-model smile. “I need to warm up before we take the stage.” With a wink, he disappeared into the dressing room next to mine.

I considered heading back to my own dressing room, but the warm chuckle I heard from Jonathan made me think I’d be interrupting. So I headed for the stairs. My stomach danced with nerves as I stood in the wings and waited for my fellow soloists to join me. Today was just a rehearsal. Soloists still had two more—one on Wednesday and another on Friday—before we would face the public and the critics. While mistakes didn’t technically matter today, they mattered to me. I needed to prove I belonged on this stage.

Vanessa strolled up next to me. “Nervous?”

Yes. “Should I be?”

She smiled. “If I were you, I’d be terrified. This place will be teeming with critics on Saturday. I’ve handled that kind of pressure before. Have you?”

Okay, if Vanessa was trying to freak me out, it was totally working. Desperate to change the subject, I asked, “Where’s Jonathan and David?”

“They’re having a rather loud discussion behind their dressing room door.”

“Why are they fighting?”

“David doesn’t need a reason to have a tantrum.” Vanessa laughed. “If you hadn’t already guessed David is a lot like a toddler—both in angelic looks and irrational temperament. He also doesn’t play nice with others unless he expects something in return.”

“Soloists, please take the stage,” a voice crackled over the monitor, making my heart trip. Showtime.

Jonathan appeared and smoothly walked onto the stage. Vanessa went next. I brought up the rear and walked to my chair near Vanessa’s located downstage right. The chorus applauded. The redhead who had almost run into me started to tap her bow on the music stand in front of her. A moment later the rest of the strings players followed her lead and tapped their bows as Maestro Tebar took her place behind the podium. As the redhead put her bow down and the others followed suit, I realized why she looked familiar. The red-haired woman was none other than Ruth Jordan, best known for her virtuosi violin playing and her equally impressive dislike of singers.

Maestro Tebar’s eyes narrowed the minute they settled on David Richard’s empty chair. Her hand tightened on her baton, but her voice was calm and professional as she said, “My name is Magdalena Tebar and it is my honor to work with all of you on one of my favorite pieces of music. With the talent assembled in this room, I’m certain this show will be talked about for years to come.”

She paused and the expectation for greatness hung in the silence.

“We will run the entire oratorio tonight. I will only stop if there is a major issue that needs to be addressed.”

Excited whispers made me turn my head in time to watch David Richard stroll across the stage, waving at the ensemble like he had just been crowned Miss America. When he reached his chair, he set his bottle of water next to it, opened his black music binder, and gave Magdalena a cocky grin. “Are we ready to begin?”

Magdalena’s hands shook slightly as she opened her conductor’s score, but they were steady when she raised her baton to signal the start of the overture. Personally, I was amazed at her restraint. The man deserved a baton upside the nose.

As the orchestra played the overture, I took several deep breaths and told myself to enjoy the music. There was a good thirty minutes of it before my first aria. Panicking now was pointless.

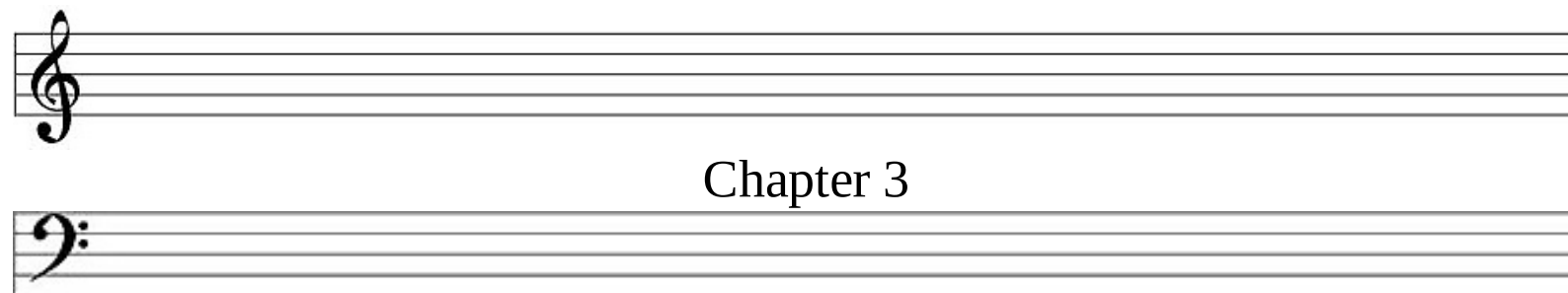
Magdalena smiled her approval as the overture came to an end, and then nodded to David. He stood and raised his black binder, and the music for his first solo began.

The man might be a jerk, but his voice was glorious. The high notes soared with hope tinged with sorrow. He navigated the passages of fast-running notes with effortless panache. The guy was a genius. And I was on stage with him.

When the final note shimmered across the hall, Magdalena waited a moment before giving the chorus its cue to rise. As the members began their number, I watched David take his seat. He looked relaxed as he listened to the ensemble sing their piece. When the song came to a close, David picked up his water bottle, uncapped it, and noticed me watching him. His smile was fast and playful, giving his classically sculpted face a boyish quality. Lifting the bottle in a silent toast, he leaned back in his chair and took a drink while Jonathan sang about the earth shaking.

And maybe the earth did shake because David’s water bottle hit the floor, and David’s body followed a moment later. David clutched his throat and began to convulse. Someone shrieked. The orchestra stopped playing as Magdalena yelled for the stage manager to call 911. Jonathan knelt next to David. He began CPR as I raced over, sank to my knees near to the puddle of water left by the dropped bottle, and took David’s hand. I wasn’t sure if I could help, but I wanted to try.

After a few minutes it was clear: No amount of medical assistance would be of use. World-renowned tenor David Richard was dead.



Chapter 3

I'd thought stumbling across a dead body on Prospect Glen's stage would be the worst thing I'd ever see in a theater. I'd thought wrong. The flushed cheeks and empty eyes of David Richard as he stared unseeing up at the rafters of the auditorium were worse. Much worse.

Whispered voices filled with tears echoed in the hall. Holding tight to David's lifeless hand, I watched as Jonathan stood up, looked at Maestro Tebar, and shook his head. For a moment, everything went still.

"No." The word trembled on Maestro Tebar's lips. The color drained from her face, her eyes rolled back, and down she went. She, too, would have hit the ground had it not been for the quick reflexes of a violist who dove to catch her. That's when all hell broke loose. Hysterical screams mixed with shouts of despair. People sobbed. A few ensemble members ran off stage and into the wings. I couldn't move as I watched our stage manager, Bill Walters, climb onto the stage and holler for everyone to be quiet.

At least, that's what I think he said. It was hard to tell over the mass hysteria. After several tries, the stage manager finally got everyone's attention, and by the time the paramedics stormed down the center aisle, the chorus and orchestra were headed off the stage and down the stairs to the greenroom.

I placed David's hand gently on his chest and joined my fellow soloists at the edge of the stage along with our stage manager and a now conscious but still pale Magdalena Tebar. The EMTs raced up the escape stairs and checked David's pulse and eyes and even smelled his breath. Several uniformed police officers arrived as the paramedics were finishing their examination.

Vanessa buried her face in Jonathan's chest. Magdalena blinked back tears as she watched one of the uniformed cops make a call on his radio. My throat was tight, but my eyes were dry. I was too numb to cry.

Stage manager Bill pulled out his phone. "I have to send a message to the producers and find out if they want to hire a replacement or go with David's understudy." When we all stared at him, he said,

“Yes, I know this is a terrible tragedy, but David Richard would be the first to say the show should go on. It’s my job to make sure it does.”

With a dramatic huff, Bill hurried down the escape stairs and into the theater in search of a signal and a replacement tenor. That left the rest of us to talk to the officers who were heading in our direction.

The tall mustached blond hooked a finger at Bill’s back. “Where’s he going?”

Magdalena brushed a tear off her cheek and stepped forward. “Bill is contacting the producers of the show. They need to be informed of David’s tragic death. It must have been a heart attack, don’t you think?”

The officers exchanged a look that made the back of my neck tingle. The shorter, gray-haired cop said, “We need to take your statements. If you could all wait in the lobby, we’ll talk to you one by one as well as anyone else who witnessed the deceased’s final moments.”

Sitting on a hard, metal chair in the back corner of the lobby, I watched as Jonathan comforted Vanessa and Magdalena until they were escorted into the theater to be questioned. When someone finally came to talk to me, it wasn’t one of the uniforms, but a steely-eyed, gray-and-black-haired detective dressed in jeans and a worn navy sport jacket. Instead of going into the theater, he pulled up a folding chair and sat down next to me.

“Thanks for waiting. I know it’s been a long night.” From the way the detective looked at me, I had a feeling it was going to get even longer. “I’ve already talked to the alto. You must be the soprano.”

I nodded. “Paige Marshall.”

“Will you be offended if I say I haven’t heard of you?”

That made me laugh. “No, but I’m guessing the others were.” His smile said I’d hit the target in one. “I’m still breaking into the business. Singing with David Richard was a career making opportunity for me.”

“And now he’s dead.” The detective took a notebook out of his pocket and flipped it open. “Could you describe what happened tonight after the deceased took the stage?”

My throat ached as I walked the detective through David’s belated entrance to holding his hand after he died. Tears pricked the back of my eyes and my chest burned. Talking about David’s death made it feel real.

The detective flipped a page in his book. “The others mentioned that you and David had an altercation before rehearsal began.”

Hurt and embarrassment swirled in my stomach. I should have expected Vanessa and Jonathan to mention my encounter with David. “I left my dressing room and ran smack into David. He read me the riot act. I yelled back, and he apologized for his behavior. We sorted out whose water bottle was whose, and he went into his dressing room. End of story. I can’t imagine two minutes of yelling at me triggered his heart attack on stage. From what I can tell, the man was always fighting with someone.”

“I thought the two of you just met today.”

“We did.” I took a deep breath and explained. “Vanessa was upset with David when I walked into our dressing room today, and yesterday I saw our conductor smack him in the face.”

The detective flipped through the pages of his book. “David Richard wasn’t at rehearsal yesterday.” “David didn’t sing,” I agreed. “He wasn’t scheduled to be at rehearsal. But he and Magdalena were having an argument in the greenroom before rehearsal. I walked into the room as her fist made contact with his nose, and backed out before either of them noticed I was there.”

The detective asked a couple more questions about my fight with David and the water bottles. He then took my contact information and handed me his card. “If you think of anyone else who might

have had a problem with the victim, please let me know.”

I nodded as alarm bells jangled in my head. Not deceased. Victim. David Richard wasn't just dead. He had been murdered.

“I don't see why we can't go home.” Vanessa paced the greenroom like a caged bear. “They already released the chorus. At the very least, I would think we'd demand the same consideration.”

A half hour earlier, the police had sent the members of the orchestra and chorus home and then moved the rest of us to the greenroom to wait. Bill, Magdalena, and our assistant stage manager/intern, Jenny Grothe, closeted themselves away in the ensemble dressing room in order to powwow on Bill's cell with the producers. I wasn't sure how much help Jenny was going to be. Not only was she twenty-one years old, but the last time I'd seen her, Jenny looked ready to throw up or pass out. Or both. Meanwhile, Jonathan was doing his best to soothe Vanessa from his perch on the worn sofa. “The police are just doing their jobs.”

Vanessa rolled her eyes. “They're covering their asses. David died. It's a tragedy, but there's nothing any of us can do about it.”

“I think they assume one of us may have had something to do with it.” I shifted in my chair as Jonathan and Vanessa looked at me.

“Why would you say that?” Jonathan's eyes met mine.

“Well . . .”

“Don't humor her, Jonathan.” Vanessa glared at me. “She's just being dramatic. You know how young performers are.”

I wanted to be insulted, but I couldn't get up the energy for it. Besides, Jonathan looked insulted enough for the both of us. “Don't take your frustration out on Paige. You're upset David is dead. We all are.”

Vanessa let out a bark of laughter. “Are you kidding? David's death is the best thing that could have ever happened to you. Now you don't have to worry about him taking your job.”

“David wasn't interested in being a professor of music.” The look on Jonathan's face, however, made me think perhaps the opposite was true.

Vanessa's smile said she thought the same. “David was interested in taking anything that didn't belong to him. I should know.”

Yikes.

“People.” Bill emerged from the dressing room with a wide smile. “The time for fighting is over. The show has been saved. Maestro Tebar and the producers have convinced Andre Napoletano to fly from New York and perform with us this weekend.”

Holy crap. Andre Napoletano was a rising star in the opera world. Critics tripped all over themselves comparing him to the great tenors of the past.

Bill paused to give us time to absorb his news and then continued. “Andre will not be able to make Wednesday's rehearsal and was inclined to turn us down. He has worked with Maestro Tebar before, however, and she was able to convince him that he will not need the extra rehearsal to create a spectacular performance. Which, of course, will be performed in David Richard's honor.”

At the mention of her name, a red-eyed Magdalena swept out of the dressing room. “To ensure a flawless performance, I would like all of you to set aside the constraints of your contracts and come to rehearsal early. I would also like to add a movement of Mozart's *Requiem* to our first performance to honor David's remarkable life.”

Magdalena brushed a tear from her face as Bill discussed how best to deliver the music to us. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the detective I'd spoken with earlier standing in the doorway. When Bill finished talking, the detective crossed the room to stand next to Magdalena.

"Are we free to leave, Detective?" she asked.

"If you, Mr. Walters, and Ms. Grothe could stay for a couple more minutes, I have a few things you can clear up. The rest are free to go."

Walking up the stairs to the stage door, I heard Vanessa behind me whisper, "With the publicity from David's death and Andre Napoletano singing tenor, this will be the most talked-about production of the *Messiah* ever."

I hated the zing of excitement I felt at Vanessa's prediction and had to wonder if creating the most talked-about production was exactly what the killer had intended all along.

Snow fell hard and fast as I turned onto Aunt Millie's street. Though I could barely see the street in front of me, there was zero chance of missing Millie's house. Astronauts on the space station couldn't miss it. Millie was serious about three things in life: her work selling Mary Kay products, her show dogs, and decorating for the holidays. While most of her Fortune 500 executive and professional sports-playing neighbors decorated their places with tasteful white lights, Millie had opted to merge her marketing plan and the holidays. Twinkling pink lights outlined the castle-like house. A row of pink and white candy canes bright enough to land planes outlined the driveway, and tree after tree was glistening with Aunt Millie's favorite color. Even Santa's suit and Rudolph's nose had been customized to go along with the theme.

I opened the garage door, steered my blue Chevy Cobalt into Millie's three-car garage, and cut the engine. Leaning my head against the steering wheel, I sat there for a moment as the emotions I'd been holding at bay threatened to overwhelm me. David Richard was dead. Murdered. Driving home, I'd pictured him in those final moments. Cocky. Proud. Toasting me from across the stage with the water bottle I'd knocked from his hands only a half hour before.

Holy crap. The bottle.

I sat up straight, and the world spun around me. David had drunk from the bottle and died. The bottle I had thought was mine. If David hadn't noticed the difference, I might not be sitting here now.

My throat went dry, and I automatically reached in my bag for my water. Then I ditched the idea. I'd get a drink inside.

Leaving my boots in the laundry room, I tiptoed through the dimly lit kitchen to grab a soda. The house was quiet, and I hoped that meant Aunt Millie and Aldo had already gone to bed. Talking about tonight's events was definitely not high on my to-do list.

"Paige," Millie yelled, "is that you?" A minute later, she burst into the kitchen and wrapped her arms around me. At least, I thought it was my aunt. The lack of glasses and the green glop on her face made it hard to tell. When she stepped back she said, "We heard on the news about David Richard. Are you okay?"

No. "Yeah. I'm okay."

"I hated the idea of you being upset and driving home in all this snow. Aldo told me not to worry, but I couldn't help myself. He'll be so glad to know he was right. He's in the living room, helping me give Mary Kay opinions on some potential products."

While I desperately wanted to take a hot bath and burrow under the covers, I knew my aunt. If she wanted to reassure herself of my mental and physical well-being, she would go to any lengths to do it.

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